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The narrator in Neil Jordan's short stories

Maguy Pernot-Deschamps

1 In 1976 in Ireland, a young writer published a collection of short stories. His name was Neil Jordan and *Night in Tunisia*, his first volume, earned him the Guardian Fiction Prize in 1979. A number of reviews written at the time praised him highly and considered that he was a very promising young talent, and yet Neil Jordan's career after 1979 was to take a new direction. His interest in literature was gradually to take second place and the world of words was to be taken over by that of images. Throughout the 80s and 90s, Jordan directed 12 films and published only three novels[1].

2 The year 1979 can therefore be seen as a turning point, a time when images started to reign supreme. For someone who had always been fascinated by cinema, the transition was quite easy, especially as he was also beginning to find the rich literary tradition of Ireland overwhelming, almost paralysing. What could any young author write about after the great masters like Joyce in particular?[2]

3 Such a transition, however, did not happen overnight and the writer-director has often been quoted as saying that he is continually struggling between filmmaking and writing and that he wants to remain a writer in order to retain what he calls a certain form of dignity. Even though he often complains that he finds it very hard to have long stretches of time in which to write, he has not lost touch with the world of words since he has written the scripts of most of his films so far.

4 A close reading of the short stories in his only collection makes one strongly aware that a certain type of ambivalence is to be found in their structure and that there is more to the written texts than just a series of narratives centred on various teenage or adult characters. It is as if the early writings contained the very seeds of the future films, thus giving the narrator a position which is halfway between the world of books and that of films. This paper will therefore attempt to show that the narrator's role in the collection reflects the transitional period Jordan was going through at the time of writing.

5 In almost all of the stories there is a third person narrative and the narrator seems rather uncertain about the characters, teenagers or grown-ups, who are seen through his eyes by the reader. It is as if he were not quite sure what point of view to adopt in the narrative and were trying various roles in order to find the right one for him. He is in turn the traditional omniscient narrator, the supposedly objective narrator after the fashion of Robbe-Grillet, or he tries to find his way through the labyrinth of the characters' thoughts with what has been called the stream-of-consciousness method.

6 The omniscient narrator is at home in the characters' minds and can relate all that is going on inside them - he knows about their various thoughts, memories or daydreams. The verbs "think", "remember" and "imagine" are used quite freely, as in this extract from "Mr Solomon Wept"

> Mr Solomon... looked at the sea. He took a cigarette from his mouth, inhaled and replaced it again. The sea looked dark blue to him... its blueness was clear and sharp, a sharpness emphasised by the occasional flurry of white foam, the slight swell far out. Mr Solomon knew these to be white horses. But today they reminded him of lace, lace he imagined round a woman's throat...
> Mr Solomon lifted his eyes... He thought of the child he had left... Then he looked down the strand and... only then realised that it was race day. And Mr Solomon remembered the note again... He remembered how his wife had left him...[3]

7 Through the words of the narrator, the reader is made aware of a number of secrets relating to the characters but at the same time there is a kind of tacit agreement between the author and the narrator - an understanding that the narrator will remain unobtrusive and not attempt to have his voice heard in a blatantly interfering way. The only exception to this implicit rule is to be found in a passage from the story "Skin", where the narrator comments on a woman's life in a manner that sounds rather patronizing because of his tendency to generalize hastily:

> A housewife approaching middle-age. The expected listlessness about the features. The vacuity that suburban dwelling imposes... But she was an Irish housewife, and as with the whole of Irish suburbia, she held the memory of a half-peasant background fresh and intact. (p. 77)

8 Sometimes the reticence of the narrator borders almost on incertitude. The verbs "seem" and "look", for instance, are used in several stories and the adverbs "maybe" and "perhaps" appear very often in two of them in particular. It seems as if the narrator were hesitant, reluctant almost, as if he both knew and did not know, as if, on a number of occasions, he were a not-so-omniscient narrator after all.

9 The civil servant in "A Bus, A Bridge, A Beach", for example, goes through an experience punctuated by "maybe/perhaps" in the first few pages, when he decides to follow a girl he does not know to the seaside instead of going back to his office.

> She was holding a towel and... the sight of the towel had made him sweat in his office suit and his sweating and maybe the towel had made him smell the beach again... He sat watching her, thinking that if... perhaps he hadn't glanced twice at the towel or hadn't seen her boatlike platform shoes... he would be now among the files of the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, where he belonged. But he didn't know which of these perhapses was the right one...[4]

10 In the story "Outpatient", the narrator enables the reader to share the uncertainties of a man who is reunited with his wife after a few weeks' separation. He describes her in a very tentative way to suggest the impression he gets on her return. The verb "seem" here is indicative of his confused state of mind. He is trying hard to fit the actual person to the memory he has of her and his confusion is implied by the narrator. "She had always been

thin, but now her thinness seemed to have lost its allure, her mouth seemed extraordinarily wide, all her facial bones prominent" (p. 89).

11 Finally, in "The Old-Fashioned Lift", we are made very much aware of the narrator's own limitations. He even goes so far as to ask questions about a character he has himself created, Reg the wine cellar attendant in a restaurant: "And who can tell what led to this, what history caused this restrained rigid hand"[5]. He even acknowledges at one point that he may well be wrong about the character and that his presentation of one particular detail, like Reg's hands for instance, might well produce an entirely different story

> His hands are red and roughened, but delicate somewhere beneath the palm-welt, and looking at them one could imagine him in other circumstances, with another life-history, as a delicate, somewhat dandyish old man.[6]

12 All the above examples make it clear that the narrator is in an awkward, ambivalent position since he sounds omniscient but in reality finds himself up against a world of appearances where he is faced with the hesitations and even the contradictions he comes across in the characters. He realizes that he has to respect the mystery that surrounds other people and that, therefore, he cannot state anything too categorically about them. He becomes painfully aware of his own doubts; at times, his own scruples surface in the narrative.

13 Since the position of omniscient narrator does not really suit him, he tries at times to adopt a very different tone - that of the objective narrator. Consequently, the reader finds passages about the thoughts or memories of the characters side by side with fragments of reality that seem to be as non-subjective as possible, since a number of details are offered to the reader in the form of a list of objects or actions that may or may not be either pleasant or worthy of interest. In "Skin", a woman is described in her kitchen

> She chopped the meat into neat quarters and dumped them with the vegetables into a saucepan. She placed the saucepan on a slow-burning ring. Then she began washing her hands again...
> She pulled the sink plug then, hearing the suck, scouring the residue of grit and onion-skin with her fingers.
> She dried her hands, walked with the towel into the living-room. (pp. 76-77)

14 or Mr Solomon on the beach

> Mr Solomon smoked a cigarette there, holding it flatly between his lips, letting the smoke drift over his thin moustache into his nostrils. His eyes rested on the lumps of rough-cast concrete half embedded in the sand. His breath came in with a soft, scraping sound. (p. 38)

15 In "Last Rites", the narrator even provides the reader with extremely precise figures on three occasions, as if to give the narrative more objective reality. When the navvy in the story is about to walk to his cubicle, the reader is informed that "It was the seventh door down" and, once the young man is inside, that "The wall [was] evenly gridded with the tiles, rising to a height of seven feet" (p. 10). Then the navvy is reminded of another wall: "... there would be... the long sweep of the cement wall with the five-foot high groove running through it..." (p. 12).

16 Such precision is nowhere to be found in the other stories. The reader therefore is left with the impression that the narrator is only trying his hand at one more form of narrative, without really making up his mind as to whether he wants to opt for one or another, and all the more so as he sometimes also uses the stream-of-consciousness technique. Thus, in the middle of omniscient or objective remarks, can be found a series of thoughts that become associated through unconscious association rather than logic.

17 In "Skin", for instance, the housewife in her kitchen suddenly thinks of the statue of the Virgin in the hall in her house, while she is preparing her meal:

> And the day was a mild early September, with a sky that retained some of August's scorched vermilion. The image of the Virgin crossed her silent vacant eyes. She had raised her hand to her hair and saw the light break through her fingers. She thought of the statue in the hall; plastic hands with five plastic sunrays affixed to each...(p. 76)

18 The reader even shares the thoughts and impressions that occur to Mr Solomon while he is watching people getting the course ready for the Laytown Races:

> But he saw the marquee pole stagger upright and suddenly remembered her as if she had died and as if the day of the Laytown Races was her anniversary. He saw the white horses whip and the marquee canvas billow round the pole and thought suddenly of the dress she had called her one good dress... (p. 41)

19 The same technique is used in parts of the story "Tree" where the reader is made aware that the thoughts that go through the mind of a young woman sometimes bear a very slight relation to each other and to what she is actually doing. For instance, there is a passage about the drink she gets in a pub one afternoon.

> She stared at the ice in her tonic water. She watched it melt, slowly. She wondered about phrases, how they retain the ghost of a meaning they once had, or grope towards a meaning they might have. Then she suddenly, vitally, remembered the taste of whisky. (p. 99)

20 Throughout the collection, therefore, the narrator tries various forms of narrative but never seems to adopt one for a very long time. He goes from one to the other, as if he were hesitating, dithering almost, as if none of them really suited him. It often seems as if the very genre did not really suit him either and that he was about to give up short-story writing for something else - a means of expression that attracts him like a magnet and which is already present, albeit in a modest way, in the very fabric of the narrative.

21 Discreetly, but nonetheless surely, this other means of expression leaves its mark throughout the collection. The verb "see" in particular but also the verbs "look" and "watch" are to be found on page after page, giving the distinct feeling that the part played by the eyes of the various characters is strikingly predominant in the mixture of narrative forms. The eyes of these people look intently at what is around them, linger over what they are particularly interested in, or concentrate their whole attention on what they are obsessed with.

22 The narrator as it were chooses to stand behind a cinecamera and to use a variety of angles and shots to suggest to the reader a number of things that are not expressed openly in writing. His position is not more objective as such - he is attempting to go beyond mere words in order to give the written equivalent of what the reader-spectator would see on the screen of a cinema. The written form of fiction becomes a medium that enables the author to assert his passion for all that is visual.

23 The attentive reader can even detect a piece of advice given by the narrator in the story "Last Rites". There, the body of the young navy who has just committed suicide is presented as something meaningful to the eyes of the witnesses - something they can interpret if they look closely enough, in the same way as what comes across to them through the movements or pauses of the camera in a film.

> Later [his frail body] would speak, lying on the floor with open wrists, still retaining its goose-pimples, to the old cockney shower-attendant and the gathered bathers, every memory behind the transfixed eyes quietly intimated, almost revealed, by the

> body itself. If they had looked hard enough, had eyes keen enough, they would have known... (p. 11)

24 In "The Old-Fashioned Lift" too, the narrator introduces himself, and the reader with him, as someone who sees and watches and who then inteprets what his eyes, camera like, have selected and emphasized. After describing the eyes of Reg, the wine cellar attendant, he adds "His eyes are like new-formed embryos; webs of centrifugal blood-red lines, leading to a hard, black alive pupil. Here, an onlooker is conscious, the life is...".[7] And what in certain stories, like this one, is overtly, almost awkwardly, made explicit becomes more natural in others and the narrator becomes a veritable cameraman.

25 Indeed, if we accept that what we see is, in its own way, telling, it follows quite naturally that what the characters see or watch again and again "speaks" to the reader, who lets himself be drawn incessantly into the deep currents of a reality full of anguish and obsessions, by what is strangely close to a form of camera work. Although we never get to know the names of the teenagers in the stories, we nevertheless have an insight into their inner selves when their personal obsessions are revealed through what they look at or watch.

26 One of the most striking examples is to be found in the title story. "Night in Tunisia" is quite long, compared to the others in the collection, and yet at no time does the narrator ever say that the teenage boy is obsessed with his sister's body - and all the changes that he has been noticing of late - or that he is very strongly attracted to Rita, a young prostitute who lives in the seaside resort where he spends a holiday every year. In the text, the reader is given a series of sequences where the camera constantly pans what he is looking at, which therefore "speaks" to the reader-spectator.

27 Thus, his sister's body, both very close and very different, is constantly on his mind and his thoughts are revealed through a simple, and apparently banal, sentence: "He looked at his sister's breasts across a bowl of apples" (p. 65). His obsession with the female body, even his nascent desire, become, so to speak, visible to the reader because the narrator regularly shows the boy looking at Rita instead of saying what the boy was feeling in his teenage confusion.

28 A few examples from the first page will illustrate the point, "She was there again... He saw her on the white chairs that faced the tennis-court and again in the burrows behind the tennis-court and again still down..." (p. 47); then a little later, "He had walked up from the beach... He had seen her yellow cardigan on the tennis-court from a long way off, above the strand. He was watching her play now..." (p. 55); and then later again, on the beach, "He... saw her walking down the strand... He looked at her again from the raft, her slack stomach bent forward... He looked towards the strand and saw her on her back..." (pp. 59, 60 & 61).

29 And yet the narrator in Jordan's stories does not merely guide the movements of the camera to show rather than tell us something about the characters. He is also someone involved in the actual making of the film, which implies working out the effects that appear in written form in a film script. In this way, the collection becomes a series of potential short feature films - like the films produced for television, for instance - and the reader is made aware of this at two different levels.

30 The first is apparent in the layout of the written text of certain stories. "A Love" and "Night in Tunisia" are divided into a great number of varied sequences separated by blank spaces consisting of a few lines which indicate very clearly that the camera has

moved on to something quite different. Similarly, in "Last Rites", the italics that are used take us from the young navvy to the other men who were present in the public baths that day, provide us with points of view that, in a film, could be rendered through a voice-over or be superimposed.

31 Thus the passage about the shower attendant could be filmed while, at the same time, a voice over would convey the man's thoughts

> The old cockney took another ticket from another bather he thought he recognised. Must have seen him last week. He crumpled the ticket in his hand... He let his eyes scan the seventeen cubicles. He wondered again how many of them coming every week for seventeen weeks, have visited each of the seventeen showers. None, most likely. Have to go where they're told, don't they? (p. 16)

32 and the passage about a young man from Trinidad who is about to visit a prostitute could be superimposed on the bleak scene in the navvy's cubicle to stress the contrast with the young man who is about to commit suicide

> The young Trinidadian in the next cubicle squeezed out a sachet of lemon soft shampoo... and the water swept him clean again... and he thought of a clean body under a crisp shirt, of a night of love under a low red-lit roof... (p. 18)

33 At a second level, the narrator works on the very fabric of the written texts, rather than their form, to produce his scenarios. Thus very short sentences are put side by side, with no apparent transition, in order to suggest the passage from a long shot to a close-up. In "Sand", for instance, two of the characters meet in just two sentences. They first move forward in each other's direction and then suddenly face each other in a close-up: "As he walked the tinker grew bigger... Then the boy was in front of him, arms on his hips..." (p. 34). Another example is to be found in "A Love", where a young man and an older woman are seen together with the same kind of progression: "And then you opened the glass door and the brass music grew to an orchestra and the door closed and the music faded again... And you were standing over me" (p. 106).

34 There are also a lot of flashbacks, particularly in the story "A Love", where a young man sees for the last time an older woman who had been responsible for his sexual initiation several years before, when he was a teenager. The script-like narrative then consists of a blending of scenes from the past and the present which could easily be superimposed on the screen. Another film-like device is the sudden passage from one sequence to another. The terse style of the narrative, coupled with the apparent simplicity of the words, gives the reader-spectator the feeling that he is following the quick movements of a camera inside a relatively limited area.

35 Thus, in the story "Tree", a very short sentence – "The pub was black after the light outside" (p. 98) - suddenly brings a young woman from the front of a building to an enclosed space inside. When she and her partner finally leave the pub, his gestures are suggested in a similar abrupt way, as with a camera travelling from one angle to another. For example, while she was still talking inside, "He had already gone towards the door" (p. 99) and then, a short while later, when she was paying for their drinks, "He was standing by the door of the car" (p. 99). The narrative is very tight, there is nothing superfluous in the written text and the narrator has here turned it into something that very closely resembles a film script.

36 Another story, "Outpatient", illustrates the way in which the first and the last few shots of a film - with the credit titles and the cast list - can be rendered through fiction. At the beginning, it is as if the narrator-scriptwriter were deliberately putting the main female

character aside in order to get the start of the film right, in order for the spectator to be plunged into the reality of her background, with the usual shots that tell a lot more than words about the spirit of the film to come. "Mentally she took several steps backwards. She saw two people in a room with three white walls and one orange wall, with blue-coloured armchairs, prints of old Dublin and poster reductions" (p. 91). The end of the story can also easily be translated into a film ending - a silent final sequence where the camera moves, as if questioningly, from the man to his wife:

> And she saw him open the kitchen door... She saw through the door the green mound of Howth Head, a long stretch of sea and a thin elongated smokestack of grey cloud. She saw his square back moving... to the paltry green rim of hedge at the end... When he reached it he turned. And she walked towards him... There was a wind blowing from the sea, ruffling the hedge, his hair and her kilted skirt. (p. 94)

37 Finally, the fusion between short story and film script becomes complete in some passages of "Night in Tunisia", where a succession of sentences with next to no verbs is like a series of quick notes on a script about the particular movements of a camera concerning such or such a sequence

> The one bedroom and the two beds, his father's by the door, his by the window. The rippled metal walls. The moon like water on his hands, the bed beside him empty. Then the front door opening, the sound of the saxophone case laid down. His eyes closed, his father stripping in the darkness... (p. 54)

38 In this case, the reader does not know whether he is still a reader or has been unknowingly turned into a spectator. The narrator has very ingeniously merged the two genres and the story is no longer a story but part of an imagined film script.

39 After much hesitation throughout the collection, the narrator has finally been won over by the script writer. Film making has taken over from story writing in a collection where the narrator has been exploring various narrative voices without ever being fully satisfied by any of them. Neil Jordan's almost irrepressible evolution from literature to the cinema is conveyed through the film-like devices used by an uncertain narrator who experiments with words almost to the point where they become pictures. For John Boorman, the film maker who helped Jordan launch into a career in the cinema, the stories in *Night in Tunisia* are "visual... cinematic"[8] and the careful reader cannot but conclude that the transitional nature of the stories reflects the transition Jordan was going through at the time.

NOTES

1. Angel (1982), Company of Wolves (1984), Mona Lisa (1986), High Spirits (1988), We're No Angels (1990), The Miracle (1991), The Crying Game (1992), Interview With a Vampire (1994), Michael Collins (1996), The Butcher Boy (1998), In Dreams (1999) and The End of the Affair (2000). The Past (1980), The Dream of a Beast (1983) and Sunrise With Sea Monster (1995).

2. When he was interviewed by Ray Sawhill in December 1989, he said: "... in Ireland, everything has been written about to a large extent. Particularly after Joyce. I lived in the city he'd written about. Some of the greatest literature of the twentieth century took place in this city I grew up

in. It's impossible not to feel swamped by that. You grow up in this culture, this landscape, in which every little detail has been written about. Every little brick, every corner, every place you go has a literary association, be it through Joyce or Patrick Kavanagh or Flann O'Brien or whomever. One's palate becomes sort of jaded. One's imagination becomes paralysed."

3. Neil Jordan, *Night in Tunisia*, Vintage (London, 1993), p. 39. All future references will be to this particular edition.

4. William Vorm, ed., *Paddy No More*, Wolfhound (Dublin, 1978), pp. 100-101. The two stories by Neil Jordan included in this anthology will also be used in this paper, with the author's permission, even though they do not belong to *Night in Tunisia*. It was thanks to Vorm's book that I discovered Neil Jordan in the mid-seventies.

5. *Paddy No More*, p. 116.

6. *Paddy No More*, p. 110.

7. *Paddy No More*, p. 110.

8. Quoted in the script book for *Angel* (Neil Jordan, Angel, Faber (London, 1988), p. viii).

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